

CALIFORNIA MEN'S COLONY

The California Men's Colony (CMC) is located on Highway 1 just north of the San Luis Obispo city limits. It is a low and medium security prison under the direction of the State of California Department of Corrections, and includes two main facilities on 356 acres. The West facility houses the lower security inmates in a barracks-type setting. The East facility, with more traditional prison cells, primarily houses inmates with medium security classifications. The total inmate population at CMC in March 2004 was 6,542.

The average CMC employment level is 1,673, of which 952 are custody staff positions that include correctional officers, counselors, and medical technical assistants. The local facility and operations are managed by a warden who is appointed by the governor. Following the former warden's retirement, Assistant Warden Leslie Blanks served as acting warden for almost two years. Current Warden John Marshall was appointed on October 30, 2003.

Authority for the Inquiry

The California Penal Code § 919 (b) establishes the authority for this inquiry as follows: "The grand jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county."

Method

We obtained the information reported here through interviews, documents review, and visits to the prison. Early in our term, Acting Warden Blanks presented an informational overview to the full Grand Jury. Members of the jury toured CMC on September 30, 2003, visiting both the East and West facilities. Jurors returned on January 29, 2004, to meet with the new warden, to visit a vocational class, and to follow up on questions concerning the Inmate Trust Fund. We were encouraged to talk to inmates and correctional officers during both visits.

Description and Observations

Our initial visit to the East facility included a tour of prisoner cells, the education facilities, the operations of the Prison Industries Authority, and a "typical" inmate lunch in an inmate dining hall. We were driven in a CMC bus from the East to the West facility where we observed the barracks, the recreational yards, and the Arts in Correction program.

Housing

Inmates are assigned to the East or West facility based on their security levels, which consider many factors. The lower security inmates (levels 1 and 2) housed at the West facility typically have no history of prison disciplinary action, no prior escapes, and a majority of their sentences served. Higher security levels 3 and 4 are assigned based on the type of crime, post-conviction behavior, outstanding holds/warrants, length of commitment and balance of sentence. Inmates housed in the East facility have level 3, or medium, security level designations. In addition to security assignments, each inmate is given an activity assignment that typically requires him to participate in either an education or an employment program.

Even from our brief tours, it was clear that the housing conditions at both facilities are crowded. The inmate cells that we observed in the East facility were designed for single occupancy, although there are currently two inmates living in each 5' X 8' cell. The second added bunk is hinged on the wall and must be pulled up for the occupants to move about the cell. The design capacity for the East facility is 2,425, although its average daily inmate population in March 2004 was 3,689.

The West facility inmates are housed in military-style barracks, each holding approximately ninety bunks. We observed that there was little room to move around the barracks even when most of the inmates were outside in the yard. The March 2004 inmate population of 2,853 is almost double the West facility design capacity of 1,459.

Education

Educational activities primarily include adult basic and high school level academic classes and vocational programs. Vocational courses include: machine shop, dry cleaning, electronics, welding, auto shop, small engine/motorcycle repair, landscaping, and office services/related technology. Both the academic and vocational programs are located at the East facility.

On our second visit we observed the office services/related technology class; both the instructor and the curriculum were impressive. It is a self-paced program, with 30 students who use computers with standard business applications. The curriculum progresses from basic typing and business math, through more advanced subjects such as bookkeeping and business law. The final modules cover computer applications, including databases, word processing, spreadsheets, and desktop publishing. It should be noted that the instructor also includes life skills such as goal setting, self improvement and presentation skills in the curriculum. We were encouraged to talk to the inmates in the class and found them to be generally appreciative of the class and the instructor's efforts.

We also visited the Arts in Corrections program located at the West facility for lower security inmates. Although not formally identified as an education program, activities for inmates provide outlets for artistic expression in words, painting and music. Fifty-four inmates attend a structured program there as their official assignment. An additional 90

inmates voluntarily participate in Arts and Corrections activities during their unassigned time. We watched a video of an inmate-produced play, and listened to a live performance of a three person self-written and produced musical piece.

Employment

During our initial visit we met with the director of the CMC Prison Industry Authority (PIA) programs. The PIA provides jobs for inmates in the production of goods and services used both inside and outside of the prison system. We toured the PIA shoe factory, the T-shirt factory, and the print plant where state auto registration stickers and brochures are produced. Other PIAs include a knitting mill, jacket factory, glove factory, laundry and maintenance. In the generally repetitive and fairly low skilled PIA jobs, inmates earn from \$0.30 to \$0.95 per hour. With the exception of those sentenced to life with no parole and “three-strikers,” inmates also earn one day off their sentence for each day of work.

We were interested in recidivism (return rate) statistics for inmates who work and learn employable skills in the PIA, as compared with those who were not involved in PIA during their incarceration. Although the state does not currently provide statistics by facility, the state-wide recidivism figures for the year 2000 provide insight into the influence of the PIA program. For PIA inmates, the recidivism rates were 19 percent for the first, and 43 percent for the second year. The rate for inmates who had not held PIA jobs was more than double in the first year (43 percent) and was 56 percent in the second year.

In addition to PIA, prisoners may be assigned to other work programs, such as in the prison’s Food Services division. Other prisoners are assigned as Inmate Firefighters, who can make from \$32 to \$52 per month, or to the Hazardous Materials Unit where inmates receive \$48 per month.

Inmate Trust Fund

We requested and received a detailed presentation on the Inmate Trust Fund during our January visit. The Associate Warden for Business Services and the fund’s Business Manager provided an overview of the fund’s management. Their philosophy reflects a respect for the inmates’ right to understand and monitor their funds. The general approach is that of a bank, and each inmate receives a monthly trust fund balance report. Additional time is spent explaining these reports to inmates as needed. The fund is also subject to regular state level audits, which have reported no problems in recent years.

Community Services

During calendar year 2003, CMC had 76,000 hours of inmate time, and 6,071 hours of staff time involved in fire suppression and “Fire Kitchen” operations. These figures include inmates directly fighting fires as well as those involved in setting up and staffing the kitchens that feed the firefighters. In addition, 4,000 correctional officer hours were spent supervising these inmates. Inmates also set up a kitchen to serve all those assisting after the December 22, 2003 San Simeon earthquake.

CMC provides inmate service crews to local communities to perform such services as weed abatement, general clean-up, sandbagging, tree trimming, seaweed cleanup of beaches, clearing culverts, trash pickup on highways, and fence repair. CMC has entered into contracts to provide Community Service Crews to the cities of Arroyo Grande, Grover Beach, Morro Bay and Pismo Beach, to the County of San Luis Obispo General Services and Roads Department, and to Port of San Luis. These crews have also been provided at no charge to Cal-Trans and San Luis Obispo School District. CMC estimates that communities saved \$189,594 by using the CMC crews during the last year.

Inmate groups make cash donations to community groups. In 2003, the Leisure Time Activity Groups (Prisoners Against Child Abuse and CMC Literacy Council) distributed \$13,250 in cash donations, and an additional \$4,000 for the annual Holiday Party for Inmates' Children. Some other recipients of donations include: Alpha Academy, SLO Child Development Center, County Mental Health Youth Services, North County Women's Shelter, SLO Literacy Council, SLO Prado Day Center, and the Good Samaritan Shelter.

Required Responses

This is an informational report. No formal response to this 2003-2004 Grand Jury report is required from any agency.